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6. Screening Our Screens: Propaganda and the Entertainment Industry

An Interview with Matthew Alford.

By Rebecca Fisher

Rebecca Fisher: *You wrote your first book, Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy, in 2010. What have you been working on lately?*

Matthew Alford: I have been watching recent movies that received on-set production support from the US Defense Department, such as *Battleship*, *Act of Valor*, and *Battle: Los Angeles*. They're terrific recruitment tools - even I now want to join the Army in Afghanistan, though only so I never have to go to the cinema again.

RF: *Could you discuss the rules which ensure that the content of Hollywood films fall largely within state-friendly ideological parameters?*

MA: Jack Valenti, the Motion Picture Association of America President used to explain it most succinctly: Washington and Hollywood are "sprung from the same DNA". Accordingly, Hollywood follows the script, especially on foreign policy issues.

More specifically, there are four factors that determine and degrade the politics of Hollywood: only half a dozen huge companies own all the movies; advertisers play a central part in most films; the CIA and Pentagon have major roles in affecting the politics of scripts (they work on at least a third of modern films depicting US foreign policy); and powerful organisations will punish professionals who challenge the system.

The resultant underlying rules for movie content have remained

consistent, implicit, and well-observed: do not question the benevolence of the US system (extra marks for gormless nationalism), do not question or call attention to the egregious power wielded by private interests (such as the oil and arms industries, the Israeli lobby), and feel free to vilify and patronise people that don't come from countries allied to the US - especially Middle Eastern Muslims.

RF: Are these ideas formalised within the industry or are they just accepted implicitly?

MA: Both. From 1934 to 1968, there was an explicit document - the Production Code - that formalised many important elements of conformist cinema, notably 'Section X', which dealt specifically with the protection of 'National Feeling'. The Code was used by its anti-Semitic head, Joseph Breen (dubbed 'The Hitler of Hollywood'), to justify blocking scripts that opposed Nazi Germany right up to January 1940. Gotta love that National Feeling.

RF: Did the demise of the Production Code signal the end for formal controls over the industry?

MA: Far from it. Nowadays, the potential political messages emanating from the mainstream media and entertainment industry are constrained by effective informal controls, including concentrated corporate ownership; the centrality of advertising; the pervasiveness of the government as a source of information; the ability of the powerful to issue flak, and the self-serving notion that we in the West are superior and benevolent and that those who do not accept our economic and political models are backward or even hostile.

Not to mention direct interference in production. When 'advising' on-set, for example, the Pentagon ties the producers into a contract and ensures script alterations in exchange for providing air craft carriers, tanks, etc. If anything, this practice has escalated in recent years, and has been applied to higher budget productions than ever before, such as the *Transformers* series.

The role of the White House itself is often overlooked too. In the 1990s, the Clinton administration was secretly spending tens of millions of dollars paying the major networks to inject War on Drugs plots into the scripts of prime-time series such as *ER*, *The Practice*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Smart Guy*, and *Beverly Hills 90210*. To cite just one example, an inferior script for *Chicago Hope* was produced solely because it had anti-drug theme. In the episode, ravers endured drug-induced

death, rape, psychosis, a nasty two-car wreck, a broken nose and a doctor's threat to skip life-saving surgery unless the patient agreed to an incriminating urine test. You know what, kids - 'Just say no... to government propaganda'.

RF: *Do the rules include 'do not question the basic free market system' or 'do not provide positive examples of any alternatives to capitalism' in addition to 'do not question American imperial power'?*

MA: The Pentagon, CIA, and White House almost never worry about the portrayal of capitalism in entertainment products. The advertisers and corporate owners do that for them, largely because if you leave the cinema thinking 'That film really made me question the profit motive', you're not likely to buy into the franchise. There's a reason Ken Loach doesn't sell many lunchboxes.

It's also important that the major studios are almost all based in New York and LA, dominated by lawyers and bankers, with a few outspoken 'free market' ideologues from General Electric CEO, Jack Welch to Arnold Schwarzenegger thrown in for good measure. So of course the idea of questioning the American-led economic system is just inconceivable.

Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky emphasise that the real product is not the news programme, or film, or whatever, but rather us, the audience. It all sounds a bit *Matrix*-y but of course it stands to reason that we are being sold to advertisers by media producers. The result is that they can charge advertisers more money if they guarantee that the film will reach a sufficiently large, affluent audience, and that it will strive to ensure that this audience is receptive to that advertising. This explains that feeling maybe you have when you watch a Bond film - it's quite enjoyable but also feels a bit like a cheesy commercial for razors. *Die Another Day* had twenty companies place products on set, for which the producers received \$120m.

RF: *But not all Hollywood films that depict foreign policy themes are blatant paeans to American power, are they? Does the fact that some films flirt with more radical ideas indicate that Hollywood is not always so controlled?*

MA: Yes, although many productions give the impression of being radical but on closer inspection are timid, misleading, or even deceptively pro-establishment narratives.

In *Munich*, Spielberg's "evenhanded cry for peace", for example, the most celebrated "anti-war" scene in the film is a two-and-a-half minute

exchange between an Arab and an Israeli, which at best points out that Palestinians are motivated by a desire for 'home' but, more saliently, suggests that their struggle is both futile and immoral. *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) condemns America's unwillingness to stop the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In fact, the film whitewashes the Rwandan Patriotic Front's invasion of Rwanda and apparent Presidential assassinations that triggered the crisis, its facilitation of the Tutsi and Hutu genocides, its support from the US, and its current activities in the Congo that the UN calls 'near genocidal', all of which have been explained by diligent on-the-ground reporters like Keith Harmon Snow.

TV series such as *24* and *Alias* received government cooperation but also raise the spectre of nefarious strains within government. Nevertheless, these products still fit comfortably into the myth of American Exceptionalism and promote the virtues of a national security state. *24* was created by Joel Surnow - buddy to Rush Limbaugh and open advocate of Dick Cheney's political perspective - and promoted the use of torture and hyperbole on terrorism and official state enemies (a thinly veiled portrayal of an aggressive, nuclear Iran, for instance, throughout series eight). In other words, even conspiracy plotlines are often utilised to show the essential righteousness of the American system and its ability to weed out its own 'bad apples'.

The same principle is advanced in some of the most celebrated 'critical' programmes. So Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* (1999-2006) was indeed liberal but the White House team itself is well-meaning, competent, and idealistic, thereby preserving the idea of America as the 'exceptional nation'. According to actor Rob Lowe, who spoke to Bill Clinton in 2000, the White House staff was "obsessed with the show" and the President himself thought it was "renewing people's faith in public service". *The West Wing* bromide worked for the Bush administration too - just after 9/11 Sorkin rushed through production a special episode about a massive terrorist threat to America entitled 'Isaac and Ishmael'. "I'm going to blow them [the Jihadists] off the face of the earth with the fury of God's thunder," says Martin Sheen's President Bartlet, in rhetoric even more Biblical than that of the real-world incumbent. In series two, the anti-globalisation movement is cut down in a stylish and impassioned speech by a White House official that concludes: "... Free trade stops wars! And we figure out a way to fix the rest. One world, one peace."

Sorkin has a new series now, *The Newsroom*, which he calls "a love letter to journalism". He says, "I love the idea that there is this small group of people, way up high in a skyscraper, in the middle of Manhattan, beaming this signal out into the night." Really? I don't.

Sounds like Sorkin enjoys celebrating fantasy-world groups of wealthy professionals who are insulated from the lives of ordinary people and have an unhealthy amount of power. Bit weird.

So there is some political variety if you look around. It's just that you're very unlikely to find a mainstream film, video game, or TV show that challenges the righteousness of the American system, and plenty that laud it to the Heavens.

RF: *What are the similarities and/or differences between how this works within different entertainment industries?*

MA: Let's first be clear first that all these commercial and political pressures, or "filters" as Herman and Chomsky call them, do come into play in more populist media. This is not usually acknowledged, but at the Leveson enquiry News Corp's CEO Rupert Murdoch kindly made the point for me when he rebutted suggestions that he unduly influenced *The Times* [a respectable broadsheet newspaper] by saying "*The Times*? No. ... If you want to judge my thinking, look at *The Sun* [his downmarket tabloid]."

Certainly, the TV industry is subject to the same pressures. Quite apart from the apolitical (*Big Brother*) and some real throwback products (ever see *Flavor of Love*?) that characterise American network television, even many of the most political, intelligent TV series are paeans to the national security state, such as *E-Ring*, *Profiles From the Front Line*, *NCIS*, *JAG* (all of which had DOD cooperation), and *The Agency*, *The Company*, *Covert Affairs* (all made with CIA cooperation), as well as other sympathetic products that didn't receive the government's stamp of approval, such as *Last Resort*, *Tour of Duty* and *Homeland*.

Political interference can actually go right down to seemingly apolitical cultural industries such as sporting events. The military schedules aircraft flyovers or the unfurling of giant stars and stripes to coincide with the precise moment that fans cheer to mark the start of the game, meaning that the audience suddenly find themselves supporting an overt display of American military prowess.

When athletes decide for religious or pacifist reasons not to salute the flag or sing the national anthem they quickly become the subject of audience vitriol, abandoned or punished by the authorities, and their right to express their viewpoint stymied.

The Pentagon will also spin sports stories. Pat Tillman played football for the Arizona Cardinals before giving up a three-year \$3.6m contract to join the U.S. Army in 2002. Sadly, Tillman died in Afghanistan in 2004. The military granted him a posthumous Silver Star

and publicly grieved that hostile forces had ended his life, all the while knowing that Tillman had been killed by friendly fire. They lied to Tillman's family and the American public.

Of course, there are inconsistencies in the way each cultural industry is constrained ideologically. So, when you pick up a copy of *Hello!* magazine or read your horoscopes, though these won't be politically enriching experiences and may even play into something worse (irrationality, celebrity worship, materialism), there is rarely a calculated, nefarious political agenda behind the product. Don't rule it out though - even poor Spiderman and his buddies in kids' comic strips have been paid off by the government at various times - especially to push the clunky old 'drugs are bad' message.

RF: *What about series like The Wire, which present a more sophisticated view of drugs?*

MA: Yes, *The Wire* provides an unsentimental view of law-enforcement self-interest, which acts as a metaphor for the War on Terror. This series would surely not have emerged on any channel except HBO.

RF: *How is it that more critical outputs are able to emerge from HBO?*

MA: Firstly, because it is funded by subscription rather than by adverts, so it can afford to appeal directly to viewers rather than its corporate sponsors. Secondly, the board of directors at its parent company, Time Warner, has close ties to the powerful liberal organization, the Council on Foreign Relations (President Jeffrey L. Bewkes is a directors-board member of the Council on Foreign Relations, for example), so the studio itself is much less likely to receive flak internally if it pursues a liberal agenda.

This doesn't mean that HBO is completely free, though. Exeter University researcher Matt Barber looked into a major TV movie starring Glenn Close, *Strip Search*, which juxtaposed China's treatment of a detained American with the FBI's detention of a Muslim - where both are terrorist suspects who are forcibly strip searched. In other words, the film directly criticised Bush's Patriot Act by comparing it to a dictatorship's legal system. Barber found that: the film was aired on a Tuesday rather than the usual Saturday or Sunday night; screener tapes were not sent out to television critics; there was minimal marketing, and the original 88 minute running length was trimmed to 55 minutes. Furthermore, HBO airbrushed *Strip Search* from its back catalogue and have not released it on DVD, though a version is available from Amazon

if you have a spare \$99.

RF: *How well are the parameters enforced - what, if anything, slips through the net, and how?*

MA: A handful of genuinely dissenting films are made that break down these barriers but they usually emerge in unusual circumstances and are poorly distributed. I was amazed when I saw that Warren Beatty's explicitly pro-Socialist *Bulworth* had been distributed by Rupert Murdoch's Fox. I soon discovered, though, that Beatty made the 1998 film "in complete stealth", without revealing any political content to the studio, and skilfully negotiated complete creative control owing to Fox having backed out of making *Dick Tracy*. In response, Fox released *Bulworth* to compete with the blockbusting *Godzilla*.

The rules can be bent, of course, if the film maker is extraordinarily rich and powerful - hence James Cameron's *Avatar*, which presented Americans invading a peaceful planet to plunder resources. Some of my colleagues feel differently but the film left me rather underwhelmed, though, since the lead hero was a Marine, Cameron sold it in pro-military language, and the Pandoran people were dull. Undeniably, though, *Avatar* was a mile away from Pentagon-supported tripe like *Stargate*, which had a similar political narrative but with utterly moronic indigenous people who learn that they must rise up against their ~~Muslim~~ Alien masters after the Americans introduce them to guns, cigarettes, and democracy. So it's a case of 'small mercies', Becca.

RF: *And why do you think that Cameron fell short of making the film more radical?*

MA: Because it was sponsored by MacDonalds ("The Big Mac is all about the thrill of your senses" so it's a "perfect match" for the movie, apparently). And because Cameron sees himself as an entertainer, not a political activist. In fact, back on planet Earth, one charity, Survival International appealed directly to Cameron through a full page advert in *Variety* magazine, asking him to help the "real-life Na'vi" Dongria Khond tribe in India, whose people and environment are being ruthlessly uprooted by British mining corporation Vedanta. I don't think anyone is obliged to support a charity just because they're asked, but if one stumped up a few grand just to nudge me into making a single public utterance about an issue I'd just made a movie about, I think I'd probably accommodate them. Survival International told me that Cameron's disinterest was "unfortunate" and added that "It is a classic

example of where a simple quote could have had a massive impact on a campaign.”

RF: What happens if industry professionals break the rules?

MA: On the rare occasions that entertainment figures become politically active, then they can get burnt quite badly. Historically, the FBI mounted vicious campaigns against people like Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Jean Seberg, and Jane Fonda - in Seberg's case, J. Edgar Hoover leaked the lie that she was carrying another man's baby, which triggered her miscarriage and suicide. Maybe Cameron is right to keep his head down.

Others just lose their jobs. One of the most radical contemporary political films to emerge from a major studio is *Fight Club* (1999), the explosive Brad Pitt/ Ed Norton feature which attacked ideas like consumerism and credit-culture. In this case, Rupert Murdoch, rather than the politicians at the Pentagon or Langley, declared “You have to be sick to make a movie like that”. Murdoch's personal dislike of the “dark tone” of films like *Fight Club* and *The Beach* led to the unexpected resignation of 20th Century Fox's head, Bill Mechanic, and a renewed trend towards conservative pictures coming from the studio.

RF: To what extent do film-makers consciously censor themselves in order to secure their film's funding or distribution, or to what extent is it so internalised that these issues aren't even raised or questioned?

MA: I haven't come across much evidence of film-makers saying, ‘We really didn't want to make an imperialist piece of junk but the studio made us’. I'd guess that few film-makers in the Hollywood system have any interest in pushing political boundaries because they are almost all political conformists - and more worryingly, several of them are real advocates of the American empire. For instance, Peter Berg, director of *Battleship*, recently went on Israeli TV making the case for Israel bombing Iran - this from the man who created *The Kingdom*, a supposedly ‘balanced’ film set against the background of the US-Saudi relationship.

But the main issue is that political responsibility just isn't on the agenda. To illustrate, in response to the allegation that Americans are “widely perceived to be selfish and self-indulgent”, Geoff Zucker, director of NBC Entertainment said “Listen, we are not culpable for the images we portray on television”. That's right, they have no responsibility. He actually goes on to say that “News informs the American public and keeps our politicians honest” - well, maybe, if you take your view of the news from Aaron Sorkin.

RF: *The counter argument of course is that that customers vote with their wallets, and so get what they ask for. Is this fair?*

MA: Partly, but government and commercial organisations routinely make changes to scripts that have nothing to do with public demand and everything to do with their desire to spin a story for PR ends. Would audiences have baulked at *Counter Measures*, a film starring Geena Davis about government corruption? We will never know, since the Pentagon refused the necessary cooperation to get the film into production on the grounds that they have “no reason to denigrate the White House” or to “remind the public of the Iran-Contra scandal”. Was that what audiences wanted?

Sometimes studios assume that audiences want reactionary drivel. In 1981, MGM released *Inchon*, a \$46m nationalist movie about the Korean War that starred Laurence Olivier and was endorsed by Ronald Reagan. *Inchon* took just five million dollars, was never released on video or DVD, and is widely cited as being the worst film of all time. Sometimes studios just assume wrong.

Actually, some of the mythologizing movies are ‘successful’ largely because they are pushed so hard by the studios. For example, Disney doubled the usual release dates for *Pearl Harbor*, which meant it just about turned a profit. On the flip side, it is true that the *Transformers* films, which were also designed extensively for Pentagon recruitment, were highly successful, but here profits were almost guaranteed since they were a mega-budget extension of the long-standing Hasboro franchise.

RF: *What are the impacts in terms of capitalism, consent and dissent of these rigid controls over our culture and entertainment?*

MA: Hollywood studios are uniquely important in selling political messages, according to a very wide range of sources, including the FBI, CIA, Pentagon, and a war-time Senate Investigation that called them “gigantic engines of propaganda”.

It’s hard to measure effects, but obviously if entertainment systems work hard to promote consent, then they’re going to have a significant degree of success. I’d say that Hollywood provides very infrequent inspiration for dissent, with occasional exceptions, such as the V masks from the excellent *V for Vendetta* that have been increasingly popular with Anonymous and Occupy protesters.

I don’t actually think that Hollywood does endorse capitalism in clear terms, certainly not as vociferously as it endorses the national

security perspective on foreign policy. Many films make villains of corporate leaders.

RF: *But wouldn't you say that even if not able to glorify corporate values of greed and corruption - something which surely wouldn't chime with the general mood today - doesn't Hollywood nonetheless consistently endorse state-capitalism?*

MA: Some films do indeed take active steps towards endorsing the miracle of the American market system (even *Ghostbusters*, to some degree, if you watch it as an adult). It's just not an over-riding trend.

I think a recent study for the journal *Managerial and Decision Economics* gets it about right when it says "it is not business that film-makers dislike but rather the control of firms by profit-maximizing capitalists" and that "film-makers display little concern with workers' problems and only rarely blame firms' social irresponsibility on the fact that capital rather than labour is in control."

Certainly there is almost no sense of worker solidarity on screen, which I think is a vital omission for the sake of America's rulers. It calls to mind an episode of the [British comedy series] *Comic Strip Presents...* in which Hollywood money men turn a gritty script about the British miner's strike into a schlock action piece with the ball-busting hero [union leader] Arthur Scargill, renamed "Scarface". Hollywood loves a lone hero and displays of solidarity as in *V For Vendetta*, *Salt of the Earth*, and *Spartacus*, are as rare as they are inspirational.

RF: *What, if anything, exists to challenge this status quo? What useful things could be done to move things forward?*

MA: We should kick the CIA, Pentagon and White House out of the industry. It's do-able - the Pentagon's Hollywood liaison was almost axed in budget cuts during the 1990s, and a single Congresswoman forced the closure of Homeland Security's Hollywood PR unit just on the grounds that it was a waste of \$130k. In 2012, the press rounded on the Obama White House, Pentagon, and CIA for allegedly providing classified information to Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal for their feature about the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, and also raised concerns about the movie being as party political propaganda in Obama's re-election campaign.

For us as audiences, we should not capitulate to the idea that we are just products to be sold to advertisers and recruiters. If Hollywood presents bullshit on screen we should subject it to ridicule, protest,

critique, and/or abandon it at the box office in the name of creative and political freedom. I look forward to the day when the only people in the cinema enduring films like *Battleship* are me and Peter Berg.